

Courage And HR's "Seat At The Table" In Your Company

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Last week I heard [Johnny Taylor](#) give a keynote address to the [American Association of School Personnel Administrators](#) annual meeting in San Antonio. Mr. Taylor is a young but very accomplished (e.g. former President of SHRM) human resources professional as well as a lawyer (not to mention a very high energy and engaging speaker). He spoke to the group about a common and much-discussed question among HR professionals – how does HR get the respect it deserves, a seat at the top executives' table? And he was appropriately very clear that HR *does* deserve that respect because every issue in a company, he said, is in part an HR issue, getting the right people in the right spots and performing as the company needs them to. Further, of most important on this blog, a strong HR function is critical to minimizing employee-related liability that diverts various scarce resources (e.g. time, money, and energy) from the company's mission. He began with three fundamental building blocks. First, the HR professional must *know* HR. This means substantive mastery of the field and all that it involves. That does not necessarily mean having an HR degree or having devoted one's career solely to HR, one can learn (as he says he did, because was trained as and began his career as a lawyer). But having the answers to all of the questions people in the company expect you to answer is critical. Second, one must *do* HR. By this Mr. Taylor means that HR needs to deliver excellent customer service. For example, HR's constituents expect benefits matters to be handled quickly and well. Doing so is part of "doing HR." Third, one must *align* HR. This idea is not unfamiliar among discussions of HR's place in the organization – HR professionals must work to understand the company's broad business objectives and align their role with those objectives. That does not mean that, like employment lawyers, HR will not sometimes be the function that needs to argue for putting on the brakes, but HR's communication should be in the context of the company's broader objects. Mr. Taylor's last point was the one that I had not heard before. He says that HR professionals more often need to have the courage of their convictions. To have a seat at the table, you have to be seen as a profession, and to be seen as a profession HR people need to look at why they got into the field, and stand up to things in the organization when it is out of step with their training. He gave a specific example in his career of standing up at the highest levels of a company to whether the company would tolerate the inappropriate behavior of an otherwise highly productive manager. By comparison, he said that there are certain things that no client can make a lawyer do, because doing so would put the lawyer's license in jeopardy.

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Lawyers sometimes need to say no, even to loyal and profitable clients. That takes courage. HR needs to do that more, he said. As noted, strong HR is an important part of a company's employment law program, so fresh perspectives on the question of HR's place in the organization always warrant our consideration.